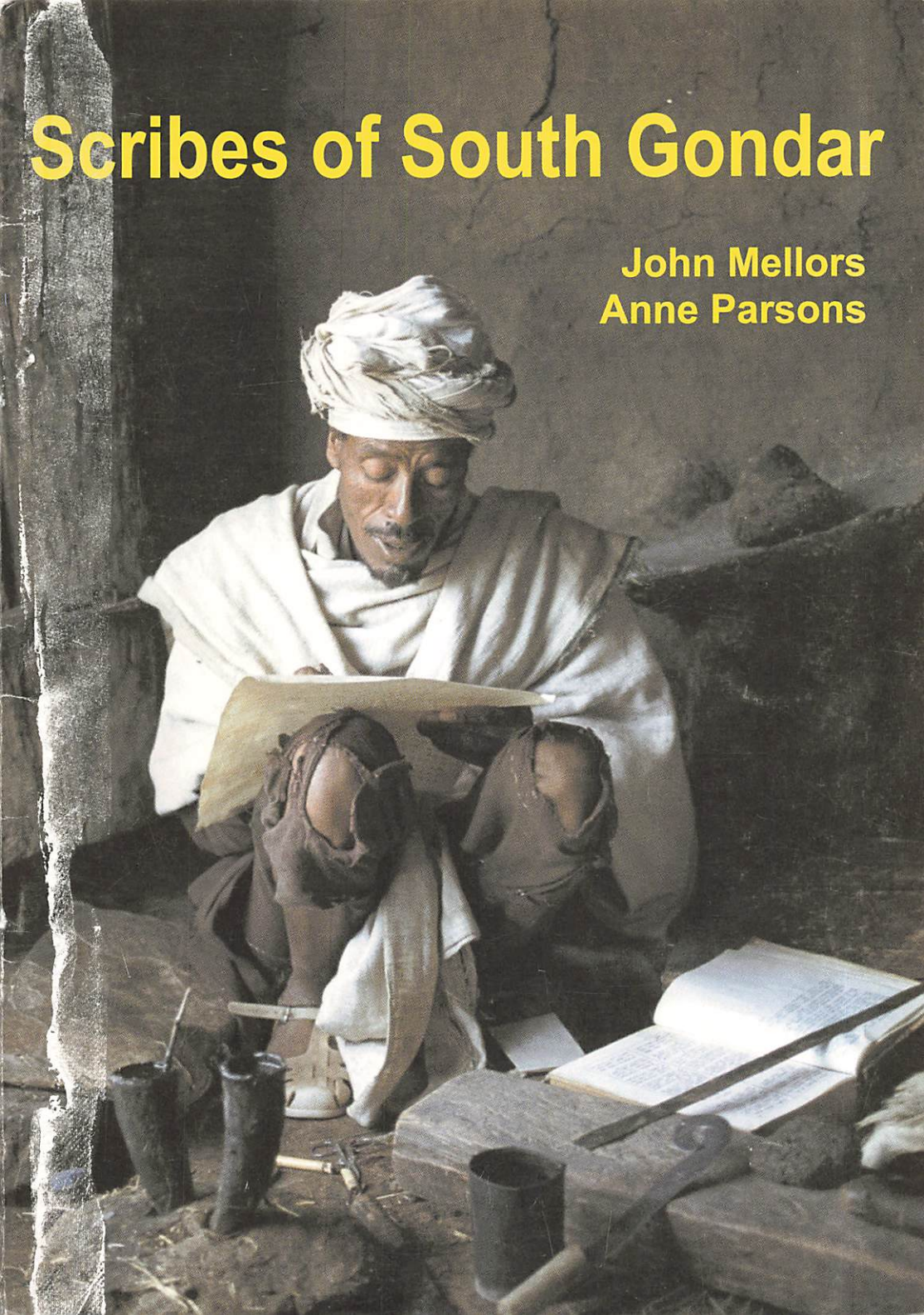


# Scribes of South Gondar

John Mellors  
Anne Parsons







*Above*

Map of Ethiopia: red highlight shows main area in South Gondar where scribes are still working (For detailed map see inner back cover)

Map courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

*Title Page (opposite)*

Qés Yohanis Melese Dubale writing sample page, April 2001

*Front Cover*

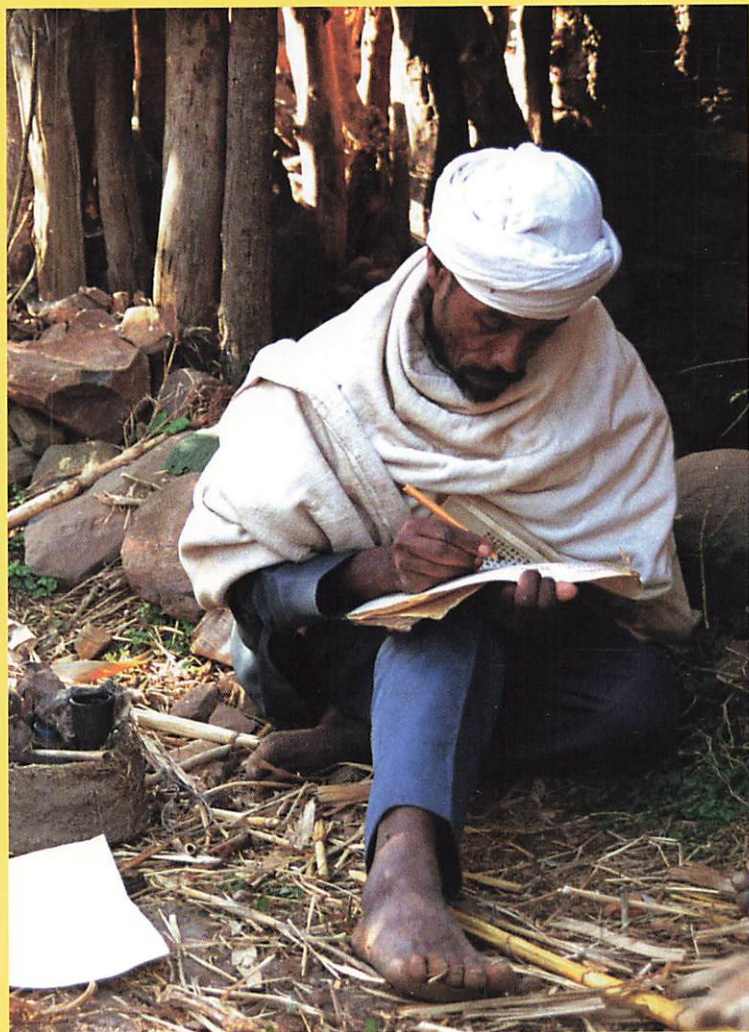
Merigita Fenti Indelew writing sample page, April 2001



Bookmaking in Rural Ethiopia in the Twenty-First Century

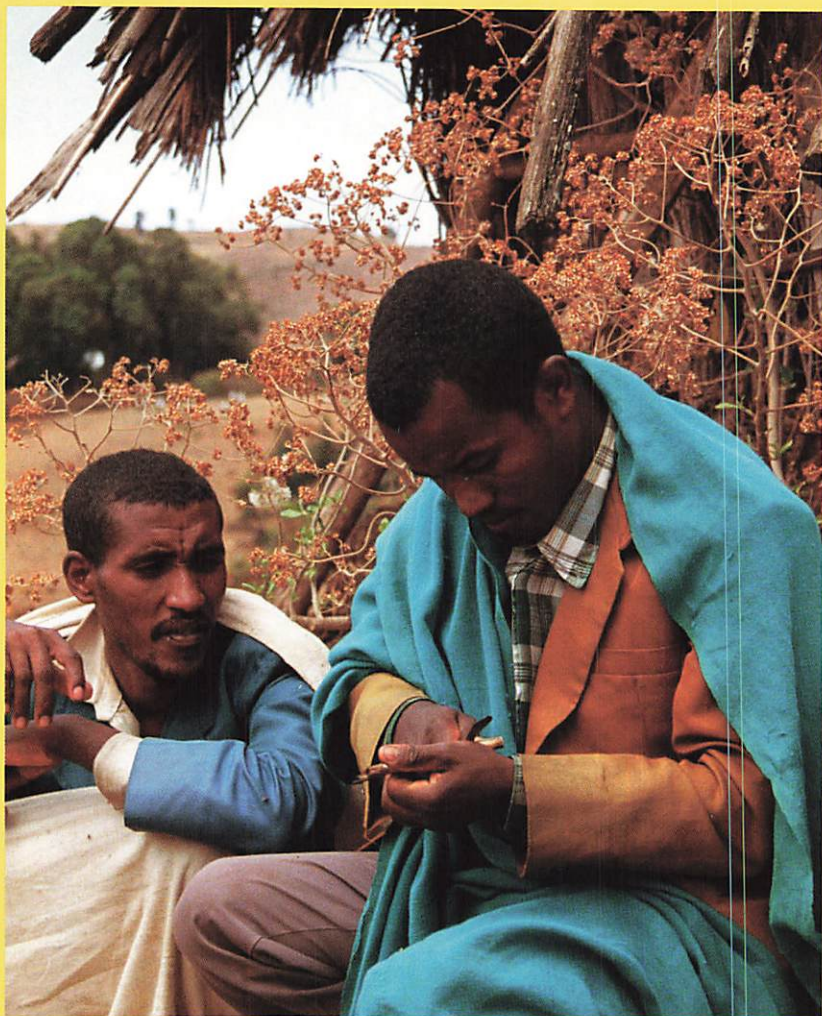
Z  
8  
E82  
G65  
2002

# Scribes of South Gondar



John Mellors & Anne Parsons

New Cross Books  
2002



Cutting Reed Pen

Isheti Zemene Yimam, Zeboye Mikael, April 2001

**Theology Library**  
**CLAREMONT**  
**SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY**  
 Claremont, CA

Published by New Cross Books, London, England

© New Cross Books 2002

ISBN 0 9543835 0 8

Printed in Great Britain by RCS Plc, Randall Park Way,  
 Retford, Notts DN22 7WF, England



# Foreword

Despite the fact that the craft of bookmaking in Ethiopia has remained relatively unchanged for centuries there has been comparatively little study of the methods of book production that are in use today. Only two works giving detailed descriptions of the techniques used appear to have been published. In 1958 Assefa Liban wrote an article entitled *Preparation of Parchment Manuscripts* for the Addis Ababa University Ethnological Society Bulletin. In 1981 Sergew Hable Selassie published a pamphlet entitled *Bookmaking in Ethiopia*. Both authors noted that the number of scribes was steadily declining as more books from the church canon became available in printed form.

Today, all of the church books can be obtained in printed form, although one of the largest books, the Sinksar (Synaxarium), was only printed at the very end of the twentieth century. Up until this time writing the Sinksar had formed the bulk of the many scribes' work, and so we felt that the start of the twenty-first century was a good time to review how the craft was surviving.

Sergew Hable Selassie mentioned that a village called Andabét in the Gondar region was famous in oral folklore for the skill of its calligraphers. Attempts to locate Andabét on modern maps failed, but it was found that the *Guida dell'Africa Orientale Italiana* (1938) includes a place named Andabiet located about half way between Debre Tabor and Mota, a little south of the modern town of Iste. We visited the countryside around Iste three times between November 2000 and July 2002. With the help of the local church authorities we interviewed about thirty scribes in this area of South Gondar. Andabét was found to be the name given to a large church administrative district south of Iste, rather than the name of an individual village.

We must thank all of the scribes who so freely shared their knowledge with us and hope that this publication, its companion volume *Ethiopian Bookmaking*, and the associated exhibitions, will help to raise awareness of their work. Thanks are also due to Endalkachew Mamo and Mola Melese and to Qés Yohanis Melese Dubale who allowed our party to stay in their homes.

We also gratefully acknowledge the help of many others who assisted us in a variety of ways: in particular in England, Dr Bent Juel-Jensen, Jen Lindsay, Canon Richard Marsh, and Jim Rendell and the Anglo-Ethiopian Society; in Germany, Sergew Hable Selassie; in Ethiopia, Abba Gerima, Abuna Elsa, Abuna Selama and Ambassador Tebebe from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Richard and Rita Pankhurst, and the Ethiopian Mapping Authority. Finally, special thanks to our friend Habte Selasie Asemare, a tour organiser from Gondar, who helped to arrange the visits and translated for us on all of our trips to the region.

John Mellors and Anne Parsons  
London, October 2002



## Church Locations

It is possible that small numbers of manuscript books are still being written in many parts of northern Ethiopia, but the countryside around the town of Iste, South Gondar, is the only area where they are now produced in any quantity. After consultation with the local church authorities a number of the larger or more accessible sites were identified and visited.

Many scribes are working at Gelawdiwos, a large village about 25 km west of Iste. A much smaller number work at Zigora Gebriel, about 5 km south of Iste. One of the scribes here, Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign, is the only one known in the area who continues to make red ink from traditional materials.

Further south lies the famous district of Andabét where there are many churches with scribes. A total of five churches, situated about 20 km from Iste, were visited in this district: Zeboye Mikael, Debre Kera Maryam, Gimb Giyorgis, Gono Gebriel, and Gota Kidane Mihiret. These churches were all built about 400 to 500 years ago and there has been a scribal tradition associated with them for a very long period.

If the manuscripts require any illustrations they are usually sent to a painter and his assistant who live at Shimagile Giyorgis, about 5 km west of Iste. These two artists, however, spend the majority of their time painting large canvases for the insides of churches.

Altogether about thirty scribes were interviewed, although perhaps a total of around one hundred are currently active in South Gondar.



Ford between Iste and Andabét, July 2002





*Top left*  
View towards Debre  
Kera Maryam,  
April 2001

*Centre*  
View towards Gono  
Gebriel, April 2001

*Bottom*  
View towards Zeboye  
Mikael, April 2001



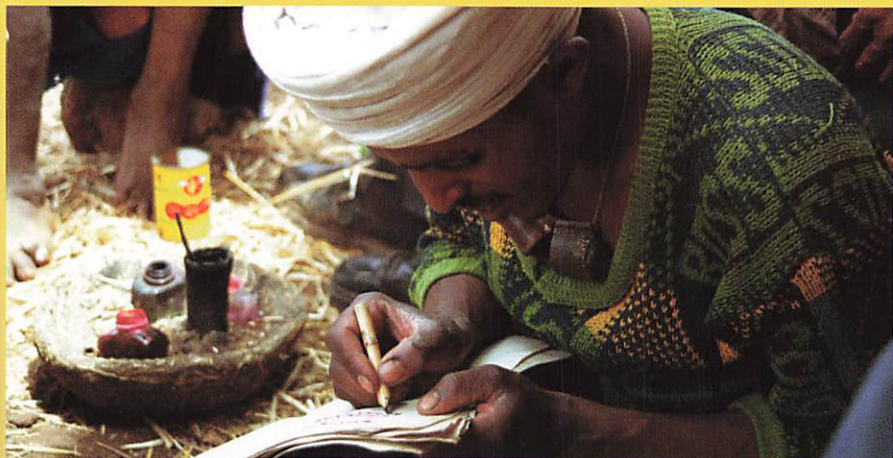


## The Scribes

Most scribes are unable to spend all of their time writing as they usually have other duties to perform for the church and often have a small plot of land and animals to tend. Some time is also required to make the parchment, black ink, and pens. A considerable effort is needed to finish a book; for example, the Sinksar, a large book having about 400 pages, will take a typical scribe about eight months to complete.

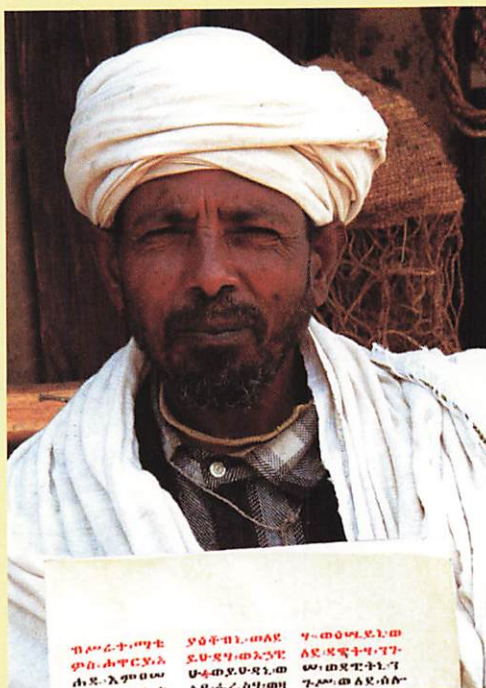
A scribe can choose to sell his work in a number of ways. A young scribe early in his career may walk long distances to towns such as Aksum or Lalibela when major festivals are taking place in order to sell work or obtain commissions. An established scribe may receive commissions from either a church or a private individual to write a specific book. Now more commonly, however, work is sold to brokers who buy books directly from the scribes and then resell them in the major towns. Brokers do not like to purchase books that can be identified as being the work of a named scribe so, unfortunately, many of the scribes remain anonymous.

The scribes whose photographs appear on the following pages were asked to write, as a sample piece, an extract from one of the four gospels. Generally, this was written on a single side of parchment and took about two hours to complete. They were asked to sign the pieces with their 'given' name and church. Some also added their 'spiritual' name. Also included in the text are the names of the benefactors, John and Anne (ዮሐንስ:ወሐና). The practise of adding benefactor's names into books is very common and spaces are frequently left in key parts of the text for them to be inserted when the books are finally sold.



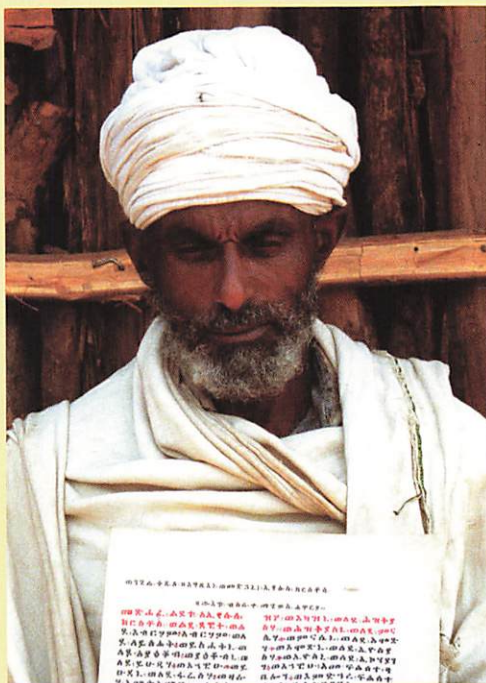
Qés Misganew Asaye writing sample page, April 2001





*Top left*  
 Mulugita Areaya Gebeyehu  
 ሙሉጊታ፡አርአያ፡ገበየሁ  
 Gelawdiwos, April 2001

*Top right*  
 Qés Fenti Mihret  
 ቄስ፡ፈንቲ፡ሞሐረተ  
 Gelawdiwos, July 2002



*Bottom left*  
 Qeñgita Birhan Hilina  
 ቀኝጊታ፡ብርሃን፡ሐሊና  
 Gelawdiwos, April 2001





*Top left*

Qés Alemu Ijgu

ቄስ፡ዓለሙ፡ኢገዩ

Gelawdiwos, July 2002

*Top right*

Qés Deseta Altah

ቄስ፡ደሰታ፡አልጣህ

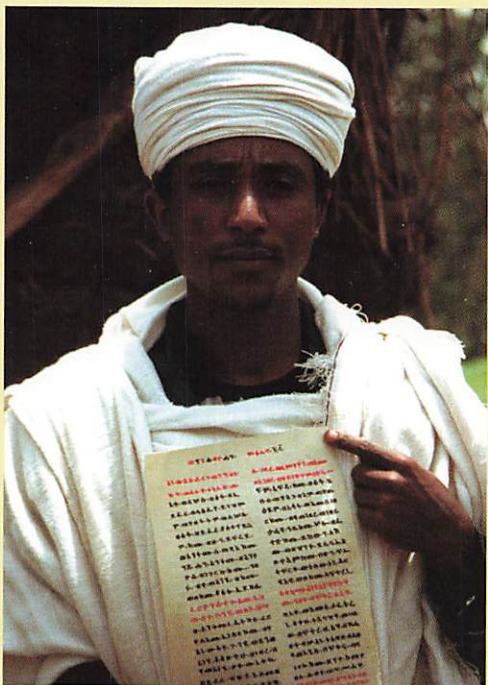
Gelawdiwos, July 2002

*Bottom right*

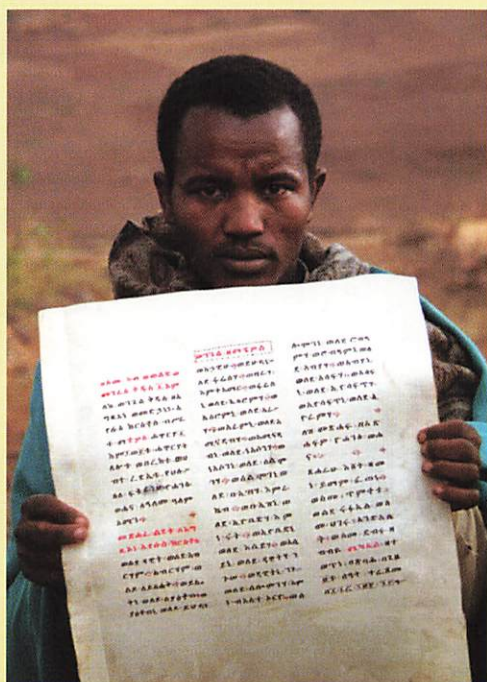
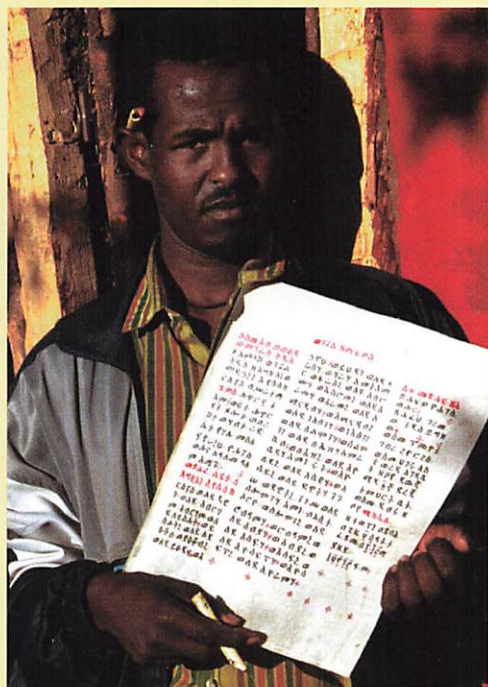
Merigita Fisiha Zelalem

መሪጊታ፡ፍሥሐ፡ዘለዓለም

Gelawdiwos, July 2002







*Top left*

Merigita Hulgizé Nurilign  
መሪጊታ:ሁልጊዜ:ኑርልኝ  
Zigora Gebriel, April 2001

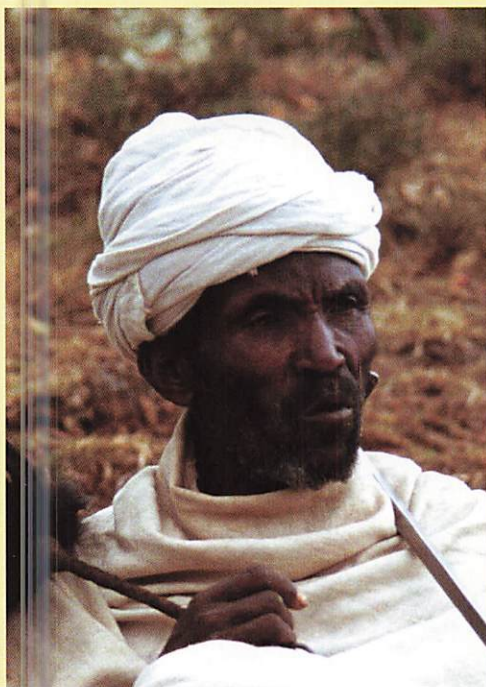
*Top right*

Geremew Tadese Yigzew  
ገረመው:ታደሱ:ይግደው  
Zeboye Mikael, April 2001

*Bottom left*

Isheti Zemene Yimam  
እሽት:ዘመነ:ይማም  
Zeboye Mikael, April 2001





*Top left*  
 Merigita Melake Mengistu  
 Tsegew  
 Zeboye Mikael, April 2001

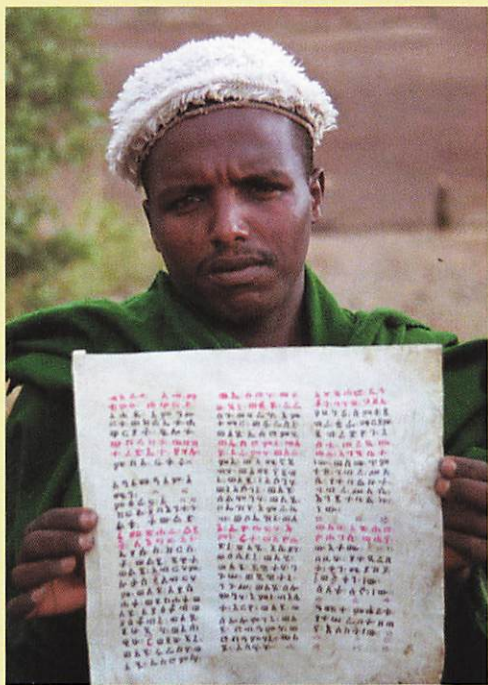
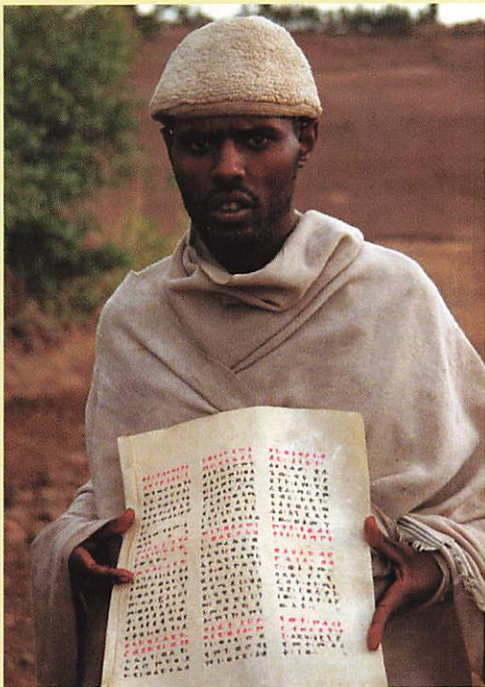
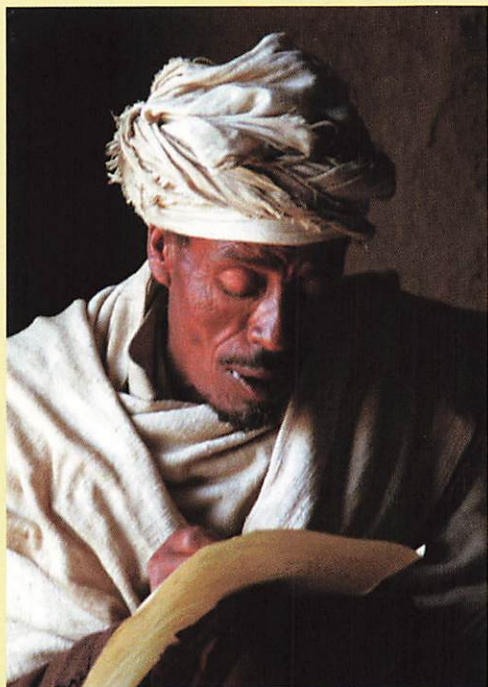


*Top right*  
 Qés Kasahun Nigatu  
 ቄስ:ካህኑ:ንጌታ  
 Zeboye Mikael, April 2001



*Bottom right*  
 Qés Kiflé Ayele  
 ቄስ:ክፍሌ:አየለ  
 Zeboye Mikael, April 2001





*Top left*

Merigita Fenti Indelew  
መሪጊታ፡ፈንቲ፡ኢንደሎው  
Debre Kera Maryam,  
April 2001

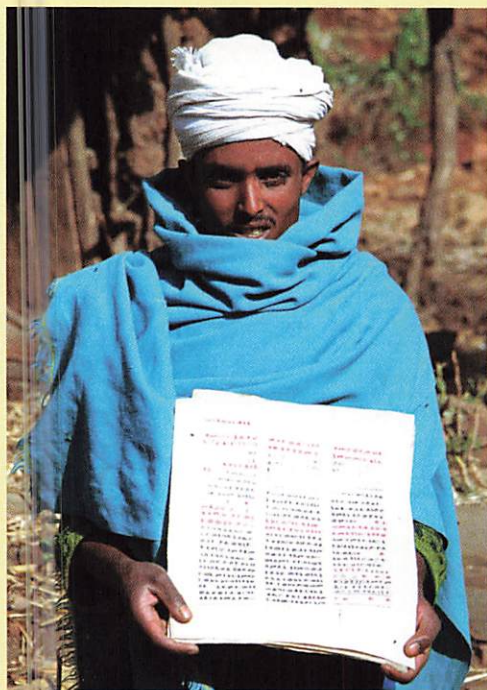
*Top right*

Qés Gétu Biruh  
ቂስ፡ጌጡ፡ብሩህ፡የሆነኛ  
Debre Kera Maryam,  
April 2001

*Bottom left*

Deacon Bantaye Haile  
ደኅቆን፡ባንቴ፡ዓይሌ  
Debre Kera Maryam,  
April 2001





*Top left*

Qés Misganew Asaye

ፍስ:ምስጋኒው:አሳዮ

Gimb Giyorgis, April 2001

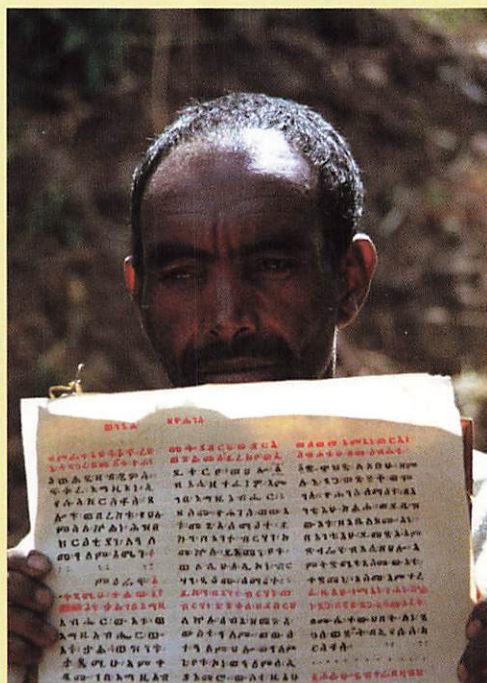


*Top right*

Qés Anlay Mihratu

ፍስ:አንለይ:ምስራቱ

Gimb Giyorgis, April 2001



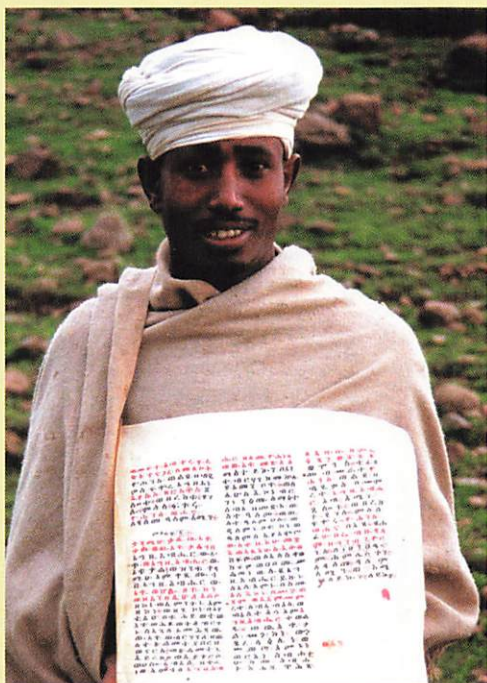
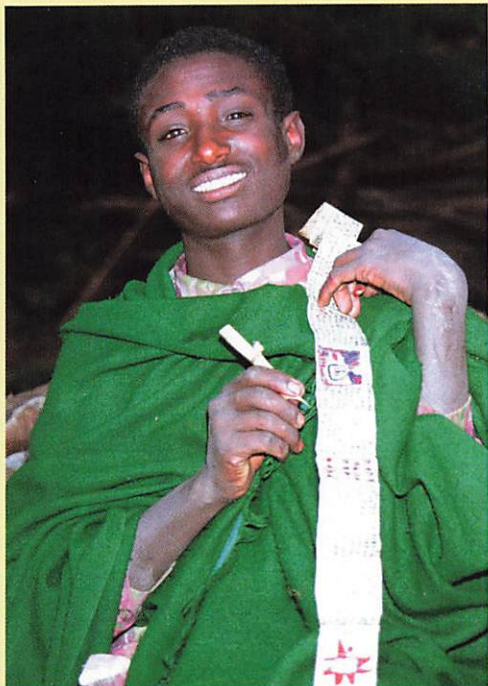
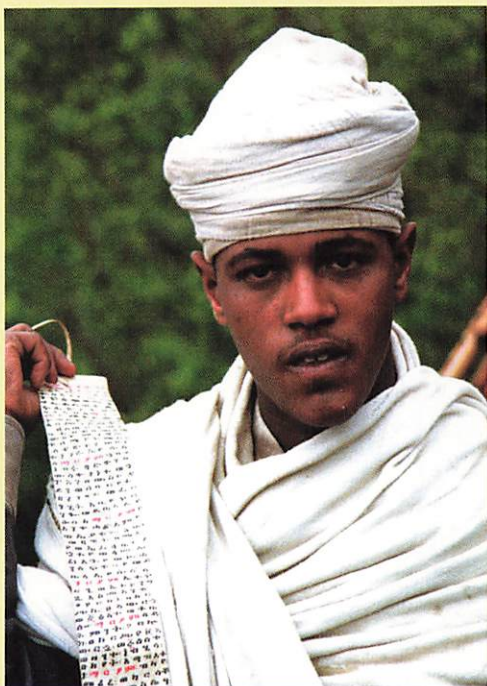
*Bottom right*

Debtera Bezabih Mitku

ደብተራ:በዛብህ:ምትኩ

Gimb Giyorgis, April 2001



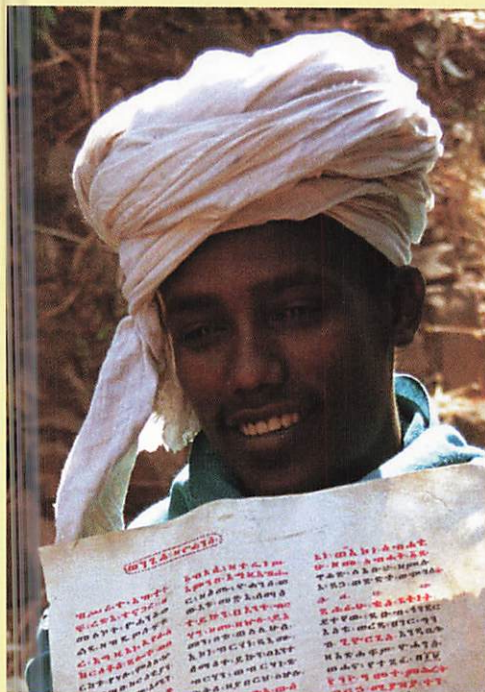


*Top left*  
Student  
Gimb Giyorgis, July 2002

*Top right*  
Student Melkamu Ewenatu  
Gimb Giyorgis, July 2002

*Bottom left*  
Deacon Biré Bizualem  
በጌብኩ-ዓለም  
Gimb Giyorgis, July 2002



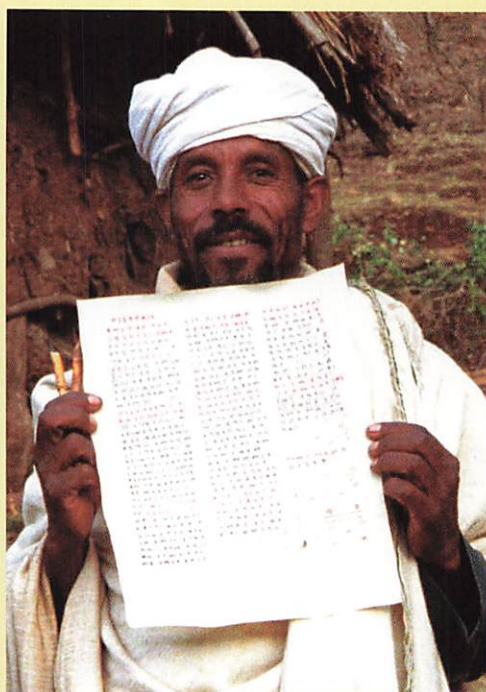


*Top left*

Qés Gitanet Yiteyew

ፄስ፡ጊትነት፡ይተየው

Gimb Giyorgis, April 2001



*Top right*

Qés Yohanis Melese Dubale

ፄስ፡ዮሐንስ፡መለሰ፡ዱባለ

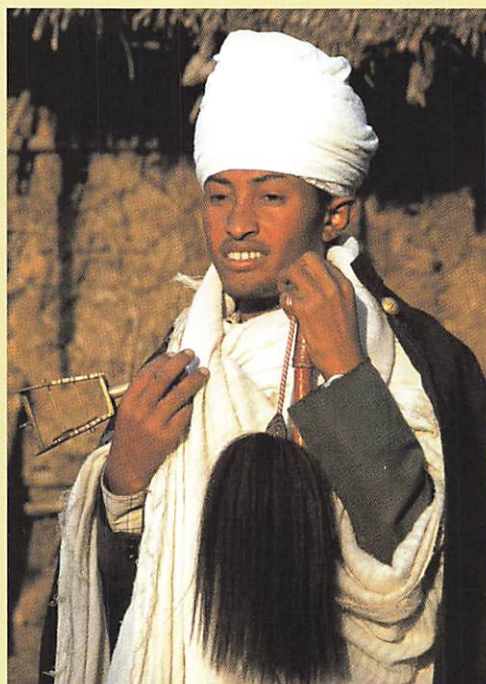
Gono Gebriel, April 2001

*Bottom right*

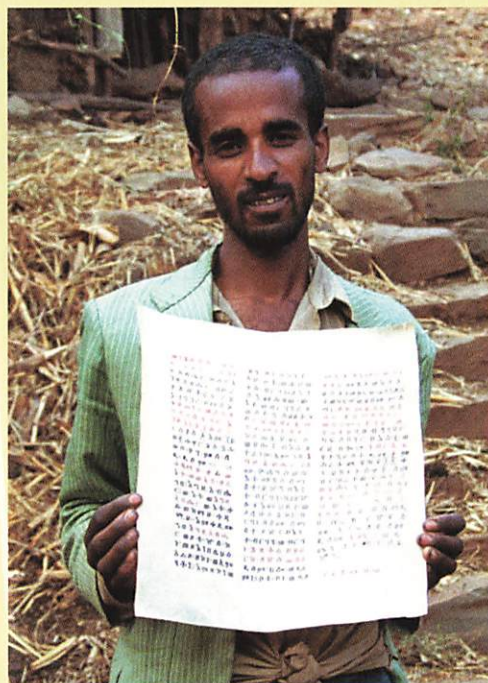
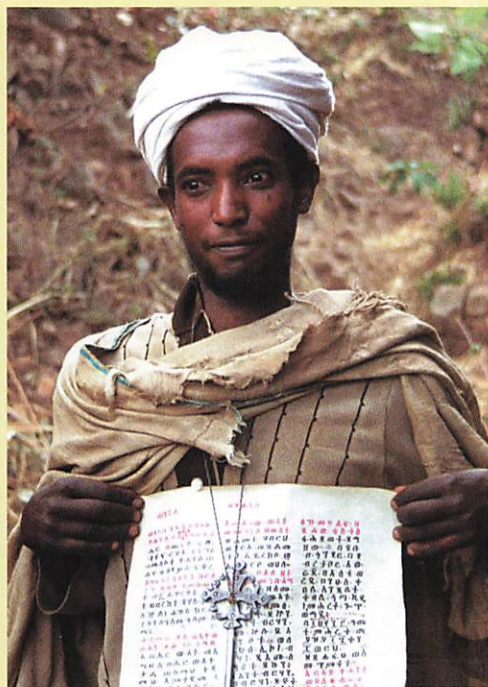
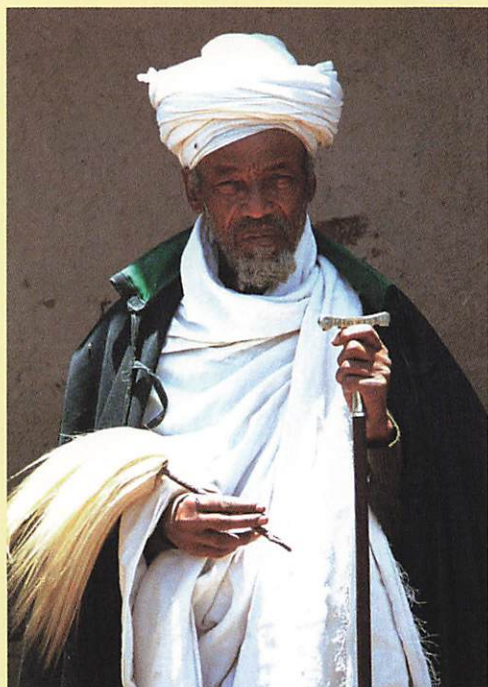
Merigita Amaré Gétu

መሪጊታ፡አማራ፡ጌጡ

Gono Gebriel, April 2001







*Top left*

Melake Yibabé Abeje Laqew  
መልአክ:ይባቤ:አባጀ:ላቀው  
Gota Kidane Mihret,  
April 2001

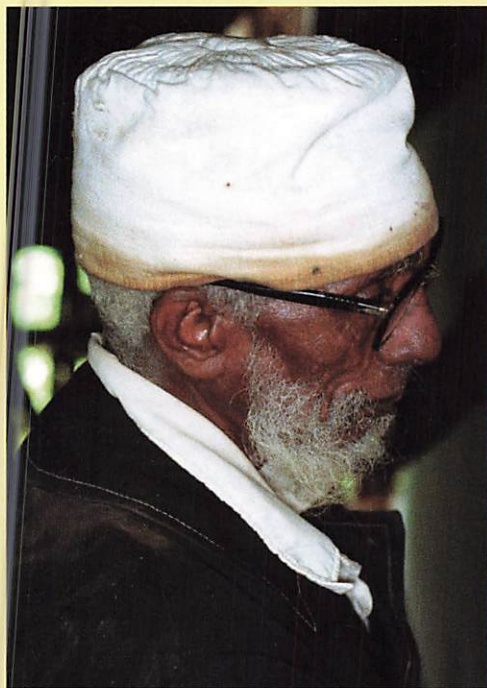
*Top right*

Qés Tisfa Hiywet Yigzew  
ቄስ:ቲስፋ:ሐይወት:ይግዝው  
Gota Kidane Mihret,  
April 2001

*Bottom left*

Qés Mola Azeza  
ቄስ:ሞላ:አዛዝ  
Gota Kidane Mihret,  
April 2001





*Top left*

Melake Genet Yowhale  
Laqew  
Shimagile Giyorgis, July 2002

*Top right*

Merigita Alebele Degu  
Shimagile Giyorgis, July 2002



*Inner Back Cover (opposite)*

Map showing area where  
working scribes can be found

Based on EMA Sheet NC 37-2

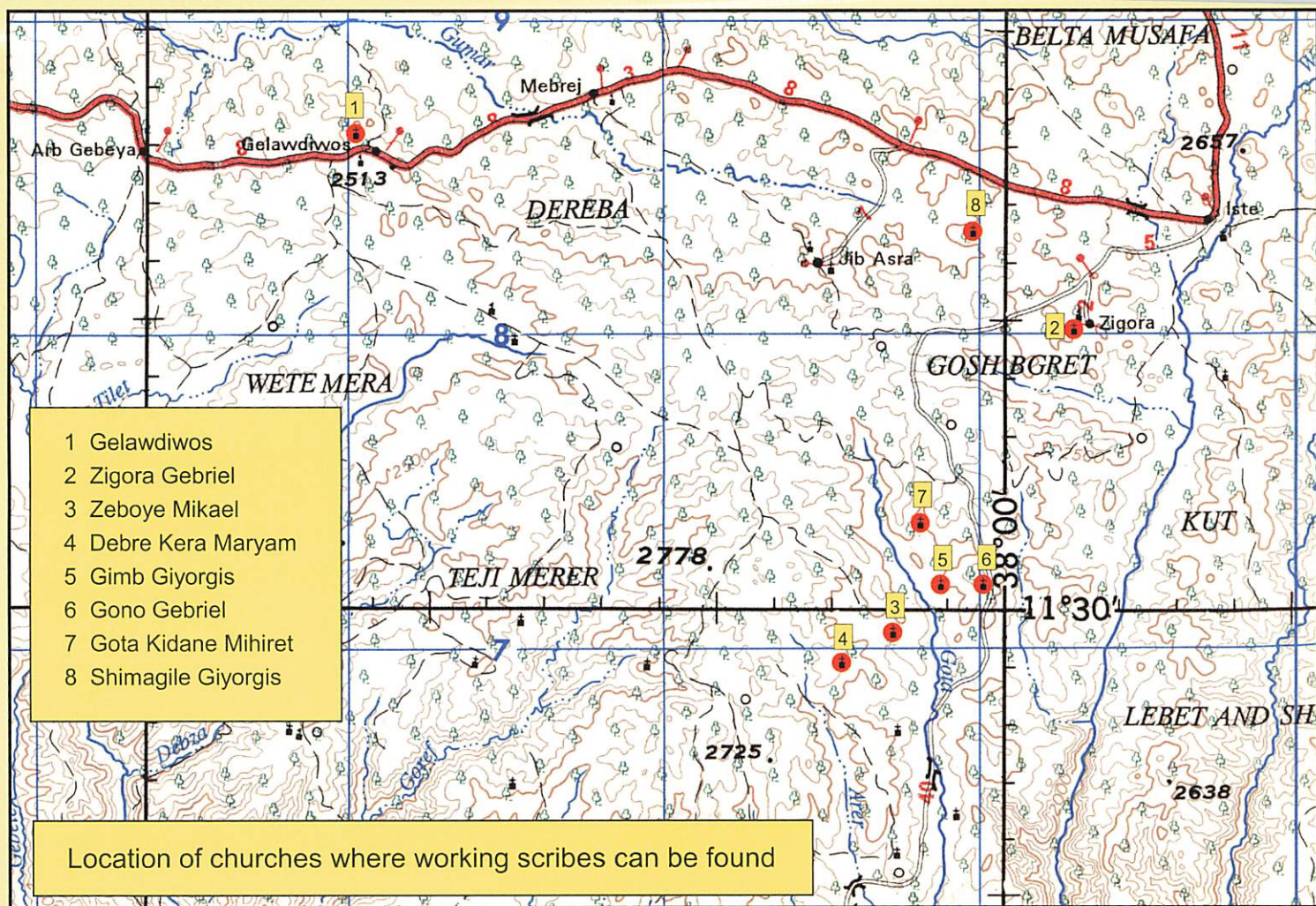
*Back Cover Top*

Scribes from Debre Kera  
Maryam and Zeboye Mikael  
holding sample pages  
April 2001

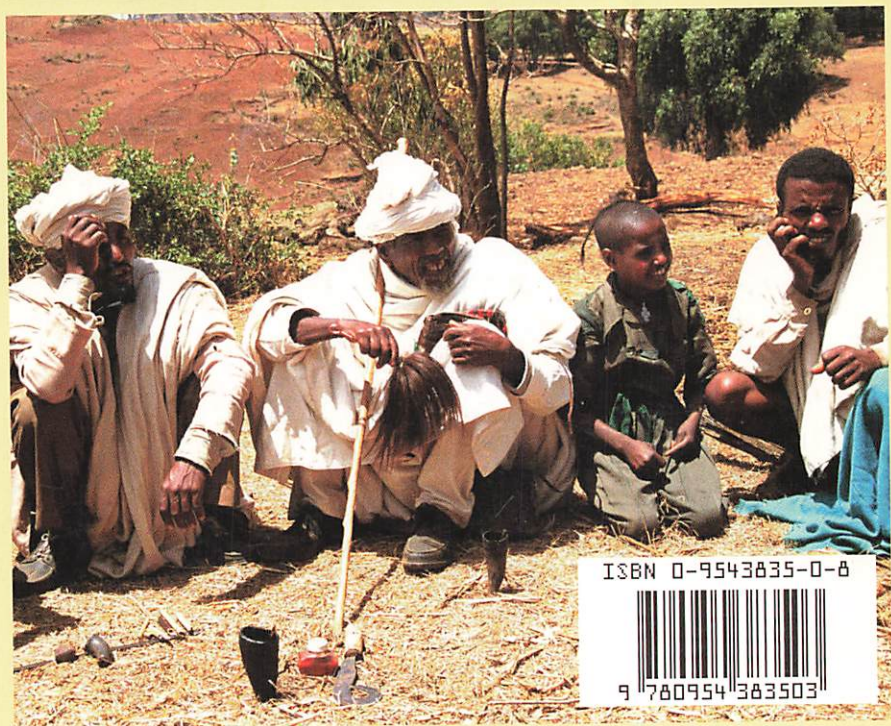
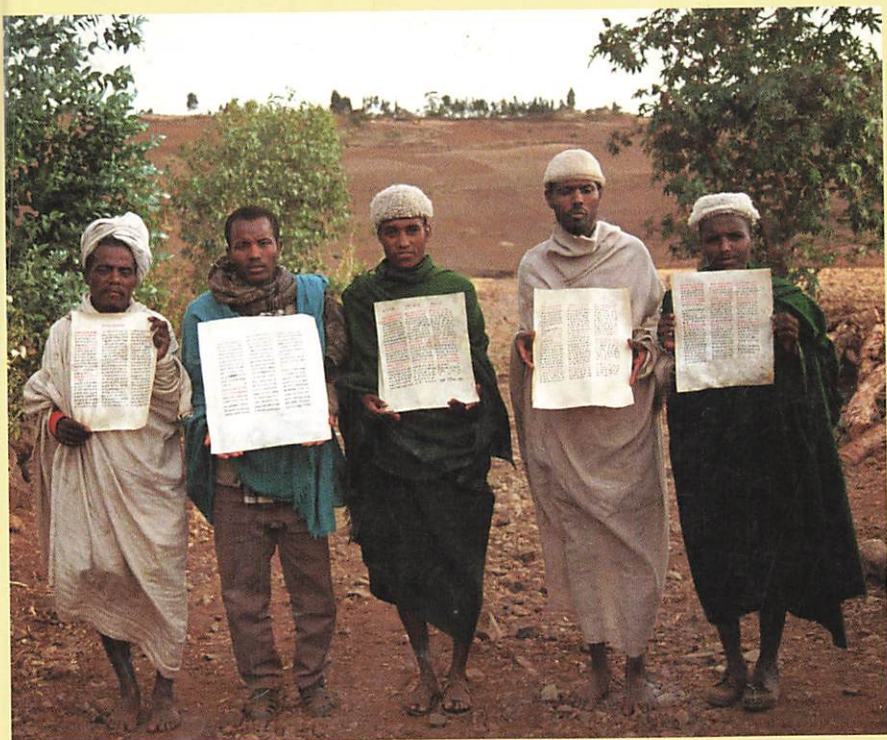
*Back Cover Bottom*

Merigita Yimam Metam,  
retired scribe, being  
interviewed  
Zeboye Mikael, April 2001









ISBN 0-9543835-0-8



9 780954 383503